

Is it correct to say, as I have said, that "'law' and 'gospel' are simply traditional words for 'demand' and 'gift'"?

In an earlier response to this question (9 December 1997), I have at least appeared to argue for a negative answer, although I give only one reason for doing so: that "'law' is ordinarily used to comprise only one part of God's demand—namely, God's demand for loyalty or fidelity to God, together with the loyalty to others as oneself that it necessarily entails." But whatever weight this reason has, it is nothing like as weighty (as I, of all people, should have recognized!) as Luther's characteristic exegesis of the *lex scripta*, i.e., the Decalogue. On his interpretation, what the First Commandment (and so all the others as well) demands is precisely faith—in the sense of confidence or trust, as distinct from loyalty or fidelity. But if this interpretation is to the point, it is, at best, misleading to say, as I do, that "the 'law' of God is rightly understood, in the first place, in relation to loyalty."

In yet another discussion (Summer 1986), however, I give a second reason for answering the question negatively—namely, that "law and gospel are properly understood as a special case—more exactly, as the decisive case—of what I should call 'demand' and 'gift.'" Presupposed here is that "demand" and "gift" are to be understood in a purely *formal* sense, in much the same way in which I use "demand" and "promise" in "What Does It Mean to Affirm, 'Jesus Christ is Lord'?", whereas "law" and "gospel" have the *material* meaning given them by specifically Christian faith and witness. But if this presupposition is sound, it cannot be correct to say that "law" and "gospel" are "*simply* traditional words for 'demand' and 'gift,'" unless, of course, "traditional" is tacitly taken to mean "traditionally *Christian*." So my considered answer to the question is still negative, although my reason for so answering it is no longer the first, which I can only retract, but the second.

1 September 2003

Is it correct to say, as I have said, that "'law' and 'gospel' are simply traditional words for 'demand' and 'gift'"?

One reason for answering the question negatively is that "law" is ordinarily used to comprise only one part of God's demand—namely, God's demand for loyalty or fidelity to God, together with the loyalty to others as oneself that it necessarily entails. The other—and prior—part of God's demand is God's demand for trust or confidence in God, and this demand is not ordinarily understood to be included in God's law, be it the *lex naturalis*, the *lex tradita*, or the *lex evangelica*.

One could, of course, so define "law" that it includes God's demand for trust as well as God's demand for loyalty. But even apart from traditional usage and the confusion that is likely to result in departing from it, there is reason to understand "law" in relation to loyalty as the relatively active moment in the self-understanding of faith, as distinct from trust as its relatively passive moment. Although the "demand" of God, understood as the demand that the "gift" of God be accepted, clearly has to do with both moments as together constituting the obedience that God demands, the "law" of God is as rightly understood, in the first place, in relation to loyalty as the "gospel" of God is rightly understood, first of all, in relation to trust.

9 December 1997

On Law and Gospel

1. In my view, "law" and "gospel" are simply traditional words for what I call "demand" and "gift."

2. This means, then, that law and gospel are related as the demand implied by the gift of God's love is related to the gift itself when it is given to a creature endowed with the capacity for self-understanding and existential freedom. God's love is freely given to all creatures in two different ways. In the first place, it is given in that each and every creature is completely accepted for exactly what it is into God's own everlasting life, this being the consummation of its existence or actuality and its definitive redemption from meaninglessness. God's love is freely given to all creatures, in the second place, in that, before any creature acts or even could act, God has always already acted to do all that could conceivably be done by anyone to optimize the possibilities for the self- and other- creative acts of each and every creature, this being God's creation of the creature and its emancipation to play its proper role in creating both itself and others, including the unique other, God. In the case of creatures endowed with the capacity for self-understanding and existential freedom, however, this twofold gift of God's love is not and cannot be simply given, but requires to be accepted through their own individual understanding of their existence by a free and responsible decision. For this reason, the gift of God's love to any such creature always implies the demand to accept the gift and to exist and act accordingly.

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1. In my view, law and gospel are properly understood as a special case—more exactly, as the decisive case—of what I should call "demand" and "gift."

2. To anyone endowed with existential and moral freedom reality cannot be simply given. It can be given only through the self-understanding and the praxis, the belief and the action, of the individual so endowed. But this means, then, that the gift of reality, including ultimate reality, to any such individual is always given with the demand that it be accepted. The indicative is always at one and the same time an imperative; the structure of things in themselves authorizes, i.e., entitles and empowers, some understanding of the meaning of things for us.

3. In the case of ultimate reality, including strictly ultimate reality, what is thus authorized is a certain self-understanding, which, being the self-understanding entitled and empowered by ultimate reality itself, is our authentic self-understanding. But if ultimate reality so gives itself to us as thereby to give us the possibility of authentically understanding ourselves, it also demands that this possibility be actualized. In purely formal terms, then, "demand and gift" have to do with the meaning of ultimate reality for us, with the demand that we actualize the possibility of authentic self-understanding and with the gift of this possibility that is given with ultimate reality itself.

4. Any definition of demand and gift in material terms will be a special case of this purely formal definition. And this is true, in my judgment, of the material definition provided by the Christian terms "law and gospel." But according to the Christian witness, law and gospel are not simply one special case among others of the purely formal concept of demand and gift; they are the decisive case of this concept in that they represent the true answer to the existential question that it serves to formulate. Even so, they represent this true answer, they do not constitute it; consequently, they are a special case not only of the purely formal concept of demand and gift but even of this concept as materially defined according to the Christian witness.

5. According to this definition, the demand and gift of ultimate reality are determined by the fact that the only strictly ultimate reality is God, who is "pure unbounded love."

Summer 1986